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Chair

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld

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● (1305)

[*English*]

The Chair (Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.)): I'm calling the meeting order.

Thank you very much, all of you, for being here today.

I want to thank the members of the committee for being so flexible in allowing us to work on very short notice to bring in today's witness. She is only here in Canada for a short time, and this is her only opportunity to be here.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much for being here, Ms. Barankitse, especially with less than 24 hours notice.

Today we will be updated on the human rights situation in Burundi and Rwanda.

We welcome Mrs. Marguerite Barankitse, President and Founder of Maison Shalom, who will talk to us about Maison Shalom Rwanda.

[*English*]

Thank you very much for being here. Please proceed with your opening remarks, and then we'll go to questions.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marguerite Barankitse (President and Founder of Maison Shalom, Maison Shalom Rwanda, As an Individual): Thank you, ladies and gentlemen members of Parliament for the honour of welcoming me here. I was supposed to meet with General Dallaire, but when I heard that you were inviting me I said that I wanted to come here.

I am here as a mother. I am here because I decided 25 years ago to create Maison Shalom for a new generation that would break the cycle of violence. Unfortunately, I am currently a refugee and have been since 2015. I live in a refugee camp in Rwanda because there was an attempt on my life.

I am here to convey a mother's cry. My message is for the parents, the mothers in the room. People may not know that in Burundi, the killing continued. I can attest to that because I decided to live among these mothers. What upsets me most is to see mothers lose their children. My tears are for them. Burundi has become a glorified prison. The silence of death hangs over Burundi. Many mothers can no longer bury their children. Many mothers are raped. I work with them every day.

I created a community centre, which I called Oasis of Peace, in order to console these mothers. They are inconsolable because everyone has abandoned them. The people who were supposed to protect them are the very people who are killing them. There are enforced disappearances. There are children who can no longer find their parents and I don't know what to tell them. The press has been silenced. Everything was shut down, even Voice of America and Deutsche Welle.

Mothers are tortured and treated cruelly. There is a 12-year-old girl who stopped speaking after witnessing the rape of her grandmother and mother in front of her father. These three generations are staying with me.

I am here because I know that we are all part of one big human family. I know that we can console each other. You can call for the disarmament of the Imbonerakure militia. The young people who make up this militia are our children. Mothers call me to ask me whether there is any way to disarm our children, who are killing people all around.

We can no longer accommodate our neighbours and friends because in Burundi we are now required to record the names of our visitors.

Refugees in Tanzania are also being harassed. They are forced to return because refugees there are being killed. They are killed in the camp when the Imbonerakure militia finds them there.

I am here as the voice of these mothers at the camp who can no longer feed their children or send them to school. As you know full well, more than 460,000 Burundi refugees are displaced in Congo, Tanzania, Uganda, and even Rwanda. This situation for these refugees breaks my heart as a mother. I think about these mothers who are raped, burned with melted plastic or candles, and who have to ignore their injuries and march into exile.

● (1310)

I am here because I know that if you wanted to you can speak out at the UN, the African Union, the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, the International Conference of the Great Lakes and call for the return of these soldiers, Burundi police officers, and all those taking part in the peacekeeping missions. That is the strength of the government: the more these people kill, the more they are compensated. The money given to these soldiers, whose role is to keep the peace, indirectly allows the militia to keep killing our children. It is the cry of a mother begging you to listen. If you want, you can call for sanctions. You can also call for visas to be denied to these dignitaries who send their children and spouses here to Canada. They are stealing from both sides. They torture people in Burundi, but their children are sheltered.

My dear brothers and sisters, I know that we are one big human family. If you break the silence of indifference, mothers will once again be able to cradle their children and sing them lullabies.

Thank you for giving me these seven minutes and for listening to my plea.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your testimony.

[*English*]

It was a very compelling testimony. We will only have one round of questions, so it will be seven, seven, and seven minutes. We'll start with Mr. Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you for being with us this morning. We've had hearings before on Burundi, and it's not getting any better.

I'm going in two directions here. First, is the Burundi community in Canada united? You're talking about people who send their children here and who are protected here, but I'm wondering whether you have one message from the community that lives in Canada, or do you have a divided community, even among the people who are here?

Mr. Charles Nahimana (As an Individual): Thank you for the question. I've been here for the last 27 years, and the system in Burundi and what's happened in Burundi sometimes gets transported here as well. While you find that the community is divided—

The Chair: Could you please state your name for the record? We didn't have you on the original notice.

Mr. Charles Nahimana: I came here as a visitor, so I could let someone else answer the question.

The Chair: It's okay. Could you just state your name?

Mr. Charles Nahimana: My name is Charles Ngmana.

The question asked whether the Burundi community was united. It is not united. It's divided because the government in Burundi sends their representatives here, the representatives of the party in power. Therefore, you'll find that there are two groups of Burundians. Both of them have organizations representing Burundi, so what we see back home will appear here as well.

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you. We see that with other groups as well. I just got a letter from another country from somebody excusing bad behaviour by a government.

Can you tell us a little bit about your organization? You talked about setting up homes and centres. Where are those centres located? Are the people, especially the women and children in your centres, in a safe location, or are they at risk all of the time as well? Just tell us a little bit more about Maison Shalom.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marguerite Barankitse: I would say that this is a great shame of the Burundi government. I protected 30,000 children. I was able to reinsert them, open infrastructure in Burundi, a major hospital that was supported by the international community. For example, CHU Sainte-Justine, in Canada, donated incubators for out neonatal department.

However, these children were harassed and some of them were killed. They were orphaned. The government should have protected them. A blind musician was killed, but the government should have protected him. Our organization in Burundi had all of its assets frozen. We were all forced into exile, but the children under 18 could not follow me. They were not even allowed to stay at my house. The children with autism were not even allowed to work our fields. These orphaned children that I was protecting are now wandering aimlessly.

In Rwanda, I opened two large centres. I opened one large centre in the refugee camp to these young people. If we do not help them—

● (1315)

[*English*]

Mr. David Anderson: Can I ask you one question?

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marguerite Barankitse: Yes.

[*English*]

Mr. David Anderson: Why would a government do that? When people are giving their lives and energy to protect orphan children, what is in a leader's mind that would target the children and your hospital? We can understand if there's military activity or people rebelling, but why would that happen?

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marguerite Barankitse: On April 26, 2015, a 15-year-old child was killed. I grabbed some candles and demonstrated against the killing of children. The government tried to have me killed and I had to hide at an embassy for a month. The hospital was closed because I handed over its ambulance in order to get all the injured children evacuated and transferred to hospitals in Rwanda. That was the only so-called crime I committed. You saw that I was put on the list of criminals for protesting and wanting to protect children's rights. The government put an end to these activities and closed everything, even schools, just because I stood up to protect children's rights.

In Rwanda I opened two centres. The camp shelters 64,000 people, 60% of whom are under 30 years old. If we do not help the 18-30 year olds get back to school and get an education, they will take up arms because they will have no other choice. That is why I decided to go live with them and push them to go back to university and trade schools. That is what brought me here to Canada to ask for help. We have to break the cycle because if these young people take up arms, I know that the international community will want to disarm these child soldiers and that it will cost dearly. I am confident that there is a way to break this cycle.

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. Khalid is next, for seven minutes.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Ms. Barankitse, for your very compelling testimony, and for your advocacy and hard work for all the children you're supporting.

You spoke about rape as a tool of war. We understand that the violence has been occurring for a very long time, and the leadership of Burundi is not willing to really integrate and provide supports to its citizens.

Can you explain to us if organizations in the region, such as the African Union, have stepped in to provide supports to the people who are suffering or to organizations like yours?

● (1320)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marguerite Barankitse: Thank you very much.

There wasn't much time. All international NGO activities were suspended a week ago. As you can see, if we stand idly by there's a good chance that there will be a genocide in Burundi. The government is trying to get rid of all the troublesome witnesses by chasing them out of the country.

When the African Union decided to send soldiers to protect us the Burundian government protested. The African Union stopped protecting the people.

Even Tanzania, which is part of the East African community along with Kenya and Uganda, supports the government of Burundi. Tanzania took in the largest number of Burundian refugees at more than 200,000 and is currently forcing them to return to Burundi. Lately, the police have been burning down the stands where refugees were able to conduct a bit of business in the camps.

The biggest tragedy in Burundi is that we feel abandoned by those who are supposed to protect us.

[*English*]

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you for that. Can you describe your organization? Who funds your organization? How do you survive at the grassroots?

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marguerite Barankitse: In October 2015, when the government decided to suspend and end our activities and freeze all of Maison Shalom's assets and start harassing our employees, we fled to Rwanda with half the Maison Shalom staff.

We received support from three private organizations from Luxembourg, who decided to follow us to Rwanda to help us teach trades to the young people. We were organized. I created a community centre to help women who were victims of rape and all these young girls who need help because they are traumatized. I asked the Burundian diaspora in Canada for help through ABC Montreal, an alliance being represented here today by Mr. Emery-Patrick Ndabwunze. We are getting help. There are doctors, volunteers, and teachers coming.

We are trying to teach courses to the most vulnerable, either English lessons so that they can find work in Rwanda or cooking classes. However, that represents just 1% of those who need to go back to school. I am currently in contact with the Paul Gérin-Lajoie Foundation to ask for help in educating these young people to end the cycle of violence. These young people have been in the camps for three years. If they are not educated, they will become desperate and will want to return home. However, they will get killed if they go home so they will take up arms and become child soldiers. That is what we are trying to avoid.

We are working with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the HCR, to help the mothers who were raped. The HCR asked for money, but got only 12% of the overall budget it was looking for. I want to take this opportunity to appeal to you, hon. members, to ask Canada to increase the funding it gives to the HCR in order to help all our young people. We could then prevent things before it is too late, as was the case in Rwanda where your fellow Canadian, General Dallaire, tried to draw attention to the crisis, but was told that he was exaggerating.

If you look at the stages of genocide, you will see that we are at the eighth stage. The NGOs are starting to be told to discriminate based on language or ethnicity. We are starting to have to identify our ethnic origin. That is very dangerous for the Great Lakes Region of Africa. The problem in Burundi is geopolitical because it affects all the neighbouring countries.

● (1325)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will go to the last question, which is from Ms. Hardcastle.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you very much for your testimony today, Marguerite.

Can you talk to us a bit more and help us understand why you are calling this a genocide and what the evidence is that you have collected? As well, describe what would be useful for Canada to do to help collect evidence to go to the International Criminal Court.

I'll say all of that now, and you can use the rest of my time to share your ideas about those points, and any of your guests can do that as well.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marguerite Barankitse: My compatriot will speak to that.

[*English*]

The Chair: Could you state your name for the record as well?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Emery-Patrick Ndabwunze (Assemblée des Burundais du Canada, section Montreal, As an Individual): My name is Emery-Patrick Ndabwunze. I am from ABC Montréal.

We have established a partnership with the Montreal Holocaust Museum, which conducted a study on the situation in Burundi using the scale that represents the 10 stages of a genocide. According to its study, we are at the eighth stage. It observes signs that Burundi is on the brink of a genocide including the fact that today in Burundi, opponents are being called stray dogs and the government is trying to dehumanize them.

As Mrs. Barankitse said earlier, everything in Burundi is under surveillance right now. We can't go anywhere without the government knowing it. Every household has to record the names of the visitors they receive and the police can come at any time to consult the "house record" and verify who is there, who has been there, or who has spent the night there.

In Burundi, the independent press has been dismantled. There is only room for the government's propaganda. Every speech delivered by the president or by the people from the party in power incites hatred. The report released on September 17 by the Commission of Inquiry on Burundi notes that for the first time, the President of Burundi has joined those who make speeches inciting hatred and violence.

These days there are at least 10 members of the Imbonerakure, a militia of the party in power, in every community in Burundi. The entire country is under surveillance. They are one excuse away from starting the killings.

As Mrs. Barankitse said earlier, three months ago the government suspended the activities of NGOs operating in Burundi claiming that they were breaking the law. The government imposed these requirements on the NGOs before they could resume what they were doing. The government did this because it doesn't want to have any witnesses to what it is currently doing.

They used to kill people and throw the bodies in the street in order to scare the public. These days, through technology, anyone can take photos or make video recordings and distribute them to make the international community aware of what's going on. With that in mind, the government now takes another approach. It kills people, puts the bodies in a bag with stones and throws them in the river.

The Burundian parliament, which is a mouthpiece for the party in power, passed legislation allowing police to enter people's homes unannounced, without a warrant, to search and arrest anyone they feel like. The police go to the homes of those they call opponents — real or alleged — arrest, torture or kill them and then hide the bodies. Enforced disappearances are on the rise. Unfortunately, human rights advocacy organizations cannot provide accurate numbers if they aren't certain that all those who have disappeared were killed. Since the government hides the bodies, it is hard to publish official reports on the number of deaths.

● (1330)

[*English*]

The Chair: Do you have any further comments?

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marguerite Barankitse: We are in the refugee camps and we have a clear picture of how these people incited hatred. The Imbonerakure, the governing party's militia, is armed. Even the lyrics of some songs incite hatred, for example: "We will rape every Tutsi woman". That is a sign. They tried to divide us, but it didn't work. Now they are going to shift their focus on ethnicity and claim that everyone who left the country are from the same ethnic group. That is not true: there are both Hutus and Tutsis in the refugee camp where we're staying. They will force everyone to agree with them and kill those who do not, even those from their own ethnic group, the Hutus, as was the case in Rwanda.

Our plea to you is to take this seriously. It's happening every day.

The Chair: Thank you.

We have just two minutes remaining, but I have a quick question.

Why do they want to kill children? Is there a reason for that?

Mrs. Marguerite Barankitse: I am just as surprised as you are. I have no answer to that question. I get the impression that they want to show they are not afraid of anything. They want to inflict terror.

As I was saying, no one dares speak up in Burundi. Even when I come here there are people who refuse to have their picture taken with me for fear of those pictures being published and the regime taking that out on their 90-year-old mother.

They are doing this to inflict terror and to prove that they can exterminate us.

Mr. Emery-Patrick Ndabwunze: I would like to add something. I think that they're attacking children in order to break the spirit of the resistance. There is nothing more dear to a parent than their children. If someone sees their neighbour's child getting killed, they will not dare protest or say anything. It is a way of terrorizing the entire population.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you for your courage and your testimony today.

[*English*]

We will be suspending for just one minute to go in camera, so I'll ask anybody who isn't a committee member or direct staff to please vacate the room.

We'll come back in just one minute.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much.

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